The Hangover

—"I'm a hot mess, baby, but I'm better than this."

Tokio Hotel – Another Lover

The Morning After

The morning light cut sharply through the blinds of the bedroom, a brutal reminder of the previous night's wreckage. Lego blinked against the glare, a dull, throbbing ache pulsing behind his eyes like someone was hammering nails directly into his skull. His mouth tasted like ash and regret. His body felt heavy, disconnected, like it belonged to someone else.

He shifted uncomfortably, realizing he was still wearing his oversized workout clothes from the day before—stiff, unwashed, and smelling faintly of the smoky bar and spilled Long Island iced tea. As the fog of sleep began to clear, a sudden, crushing wave of memory hit him, making his chest tighten with absolute mortification.

Oh god.

The ugly, broken crying. The way his voice had slurred. The desperate, incoherent things he'd said. The feeling of Tui's shoulder beneath his cheek—warm, solid, safe—and then the moment when shame had overwhelmed him and he'd shifted away, burying his face directly into William's shoulder instead.

The raw, burning shame of it made him want to disappear entirely. To evaporate. To cease existing. He had been so desperately terrified of letting Tui see him completely broken and unhinged. And now Tui had seen exactly that.

Lego pressed his face into the pillow, groaning softly. His stomach churned—partly from the alcohol, partly from the mortification.

I'm never drinking again. Ever. Not even at weddings. Not even if someone pays me.

He turned his head slightly toward the bedroom door. It was sitting ajar, a sliver of the living room visible through the gap. Right there in the frame, William was standing with his phone in hand, his sharp, observant eyes tracking something on the screen. The early morning light caught his profile—the careful way he held himself, the concentration on his face.

Suddenly, William looked up. Their eyes met across the quiet room.

Lego froze. His heart stuttered in his chest.

He saw everything. He knows. He knows I'm a complete disaster.

Lowering his phone, William pushed the door open completely and walked into the bedroom. Without an ounce of hesitation or ceremony, he threw his entire weight onto the edge of the mattress. The sudden, heavy movement caused the bed to dip violently, sending a sharp jolt through the room and directly into Lego's fragile, hungover body.

Lego winced, his stomach violently turning at the motion. He pressed a hand against his midsection, groaning. "My tummy hurts a little." Lego complained, his voice small and pathetic.

William let out a sudden, bright laugh—the sound entirely too loud for Lego's fragile state. The cheerfulness of it felt almost cruel in contrast to Lego's suffering.

"It's because you're not used to drinking," William said, still grinning. "I've never seen you drunk before. Not once. Not even at parties. You're usually the one taking care of everyone else."

"Please stop being loud," Lego whispered, pressing his fingers against his temples.

"This is my normal volume."

"Your normal volume is a weapon."

William laughed again, softer this time. Lego let out a long, defeated sigh. The weight of his utter humiliation was too much to handle in the morning light. He turned his body away from William, hiding his face entirely in his trembling hands as his cheeks burned red.

"I was supposed to confess to Tui," Lego said, his voice muffled behind his palms. "Now it's embarrassing. How can I confess when he's seen me like...that? When he had to carry me home like a drunk baby? When I cried all over him?"

William froze. His laughter died down instantly. He leaned closer, his brow furrowing in genuine surprise. "Confess?" William repeated. "You were planning to tell Tui you have feelings for him?"

The sheer volume of William's voice sent a spike of panic through Lego's hangover-addled brain. He swung his arm out, playfully but firmly punching William's arm before tapping his knuckles against his chest in rapid succession.

"Don't talk so loud!" Lego hissed in a panicked whisper. "What if he hears you? He's right outside!"

William opened his mouth to tease him—a smirk already playing on his lips—but the words caught in his throat. As Lego pulled his hands away from his face, William saw the sudden, heavy sheen of moisture in his friend's wide eyes. The playful atmosphere evaporated immediately, replaced by the stark, worrying reality of how fragile Lego truly was right now.

William's expression softened instantly. His voice dropped into a rare, grounding tone as he reached out to steady the edge of the blanket. "I'm sure in a week he'll forget about carrying you around drunk," William said gently. "And then you can confess. When things are calmer. When you're ready. Don't cry. You've been crying a lot lately."

Lego's lower lip trembled. "I know. I can't stop. Everything hurts and everyone's fighting and I don't know how to fix it and I'm so tired—"

"You don't have to fix it," William said firmly. "That's not your job. You're allowed to just be a person who's struggling. You don't have to be everyone's solution."

Lego nodded, but the tears were already spilling over. William was about to say more—to offer more comfort, more reassurance—but the sound of the bedroom door creaking open further cut him off.

Tui stood in the doorway.

His tall frame was silhouetted against the bright morning light filtering in from the kitchen. He was holding a kitchen towel in one hand, looking down at the two younger boys tangled in the sheets of Lego's bed.

There was no judgment in his eyes. None of the awkwardness Lego had been so terrified of facing. None of the pity or disappointment or disgust that Lego had convinced himself would be there. Only that steady, unshakeable, protective energy that always made Tui feel like a safe harbor. Like home.

Instead of pushing for the secrets Lego had sobbed about the night before, or demanding to know why their entire world was fracturing, Tui had channeled all of his worry into something practical, something tangible, something that could actually help.

The small apartment was already filled with the rich, comforting aroma of a hot hangover meal and freshly brewed ginger tea—a subtle, quiet declaration that seeing Lego's absolute vulnerability hadn't pushed Tui away at all.

It had only brought him closer.

Tui interrupted them gently, a small, reassuring smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "I made breakfast."

Lego peeked out from behind his fingers, his heart doing a strange, nervous flip at the sight of him.

He's still here. He didn't leave. He's not angry or disgusted or disappointed. He made me breakfast.

Tui tossed the kitchen towel over his shoulder and gestured toward the living room.

"Come on. Get up. The tea will help with your stomach. You need to eat something warm."

William slid off the mattress, giving Lego a subtle, lingering pat on the shoulder that felt like a silent reassurance. See? Told you.

"See?" William murmured under his breath, flashing a quick grin before heading out to the kitchen. "He's not traumatized by your crying. He made you soup."

Left alone for a brief second, Lego pressed his face into his pillow. A tiny, genuine smile finally broke through his hangover and his shame and his exhaustion.

The group chat might still be completely silent. The secrets might still be heavy. Hong might still be avoiding everyone. Nut might still be confused. Est might still be withdrawn. But looking out at Tui setting down three bowls of rice soup on the small table, Lego realized that some bonds were too thick for the silence to break.

The afternoon sun filtered through the blinds, casting warm, geometric bars of light across the large bed where William was sprawled out, a laptop resting on his thighs. The heavy silence that had plagued the group chat for days felt temporarily locked outside the walls of Lego's bedroom. The space felt safe. Insulated. Like a bubble where honesty was allowed.

Lego had finally taken a bath—scrubbing away the lingering, heavy scent of stale bar smoke and alcohol from his skin. He was dressed comfortably in an oversized pink t-shirt with a heart design and his underwear, a damp white towel draped over his shoulders to catch the droplets falling from his wet hair.

Tui had left an hour earlier to run an errand, leaving the two younger boys alone in the quiet apartment.

William finally closed the laptop screen halfway. His sharp, observant eyes dimmed as he stared down at the keyboard, the heavy weight of his own hidden architecture catching up to him in the quiet space.

"Everyone knows except Est and Hong," William said quietly, his voice low, cutting through the hum of the laptop fan. "I already told Tui and Nut that I slept with Est the night we met him. But I think Hong suspects something."

Lego nodded slowly, toweling his hair. He remembered the morning after the warehouse party—the tension at the breakfast table, the careful way Hong had asked about William's whereabouts, the protective edge in his voice when he'd said just make sure he was safe.

"The next day at the breakfast table, Hong asked about it," Lego said. "You know, after the whole scene his manager made. Tui said you were careful. That you and

Est were both adults who decided to go off together. That you wouldn't do anything Est didn't want."

William let out a long, heavy sigh. His shoulders slumped as he tilted his head back against the headboard. The stark contrast between the intense, silent night he had shared with Est and the cold distance that existed between them now felt like a chasm he didn't know how to cross.

"But I feel guilty that Est never talks about that night," William said, his voice cracking slightly with raw, buried vulnerability. "It makes me feel like it all happened in my head. Like it was just—a fantasy. A silly crush at first sight that I built into something bigger than it was."

Lego sat cross-legged on the edge of the mattress, using a corner of the towel to gently dry the ends of his hair. He watched William closely, tracking the deep, heavy shadow of exhaustion that had settled over his friend's features. William stared down at his closed laptop. His fingers traced the edge of the aluminum frame with tight, painful intensity.

"I've been in love with Est this whole time," William said. His voice dropped to a raw, hollow whisper. "And now he's obsessed with Nut. And I'm just—invisible. They're fighting now, and he and I never got close. And now I really don't have any excuse to try and talk to him. I can't just walk up to him and say 'hey, remember that night you don't remember? That was me. And I've been in love with you ever since.'"

Lego froze. His hands fell still against the towel. The words seemed to echo in the quiet afternoon light of the bedroom. As he looked at the sharp, defensive slump of William's shoulders, a sudden, piercing realization washed over him.

He understood.

William's pain wasn't just a simple case of unrequited timing. It was a mirror image of the exact same agonizing blueprint that was currently destroying Hong in the dark.

Both of them were standing on the periphery, watching the people they loved entirely consumed by something they couldn't compete with. An old, blurry ghost that neither of them had the power to fight.

The only difference was that Hong's grief was aimed backward—into fifteen years of history, into a first love that had been stolen and never properly mourned. William's grief was aimed at a single night—a moment of connection that had been real for him but had disappeared into Est's protective amnesia. But the pain was identical: I love someone who doesn't see me. I love someone who is looking for someone else. I exist in their world but not in their heart.

Lego let out a long, quiet breath. The weight of the iron gag around his own mouth

—the promise he'd made to Hong not to tell anyone about their history—felt suddenly intolerable.

For days, he had watched as the unity of his group of friends completely crumbled under the weight of hidden truths, silent calculations, and fake smiles. And he was part of it. He was contributing to it. By keeping Hong's secret, he was allowing William and Est to remain in the dark. Allowing Nut to stay confused. Allowing everyone to suffer separately instead of healing together.

Lying has only turned everything upside down.

Lego moved across the bed and hugged William tightly. William hugged him back—the embrace desperate. When they pulled apart, Lego looked directly into William's eyes.

"You should tell him," Lego said firmly. "You should tell Est. He should know you exist. That you remember everything. That it wasn't nothing. Maybe something good could come of all this."

William shook his head. "But what if—"

"What if he rejects you?" Lego interrupted. "What if he doesn't feel the same way? What if it ruins everything?" He paused, choosing his words carefully. "William, you're already suffering. You're already carrying this pain alone. Telling him won't make it worse. It might actually make it better. At least then you'll know. At least then it'll be real instead of trapped in your head."

William was quiet for a long moment.

"Lying has only turned everything upside down," Lego said quietly. "For all of us. Hong is lying about his feelings. Nut doesn't know what he did wrong because Hong won't tell him. Est is lying to himself about what he's looking for. I'm lying by keeping Hong's secret. And you—you're lying by pretending that night didn't matter."

He squeezed William's hand.

"Someone has to be brave enough to tell the truth," Lego said. "Even if it's scary. Even if it hurts. Someone has to stop hiding."

William looked at him—really looked at him—and saw the exhaustion, the weight, the toll that keeping secrets was taking on Lego's entire being.

"You're right," William said quietly.

"I know I'm right," Lego said, managing a small smile. "I'm always right. That's my burden."

William laughed—a small, broken sound. But it was real.

That night. Hong's apartment.

The heavy velvet curtains of Hong's apartment were drawn completely shut, locking the bitter, familiar haze of trapped cigarette smoke inside the dim room. Outside, the night was thick. The sky was completely hidden behind a dense blanket of dark clouds. Rain threatened but hadn't started yet—the air heavy with the promise of it.

Hong sat cross-legged on the floor, his back pressed against the base of the sofa in his faded black shirt. He was staring blankly into the dark, his phone sitting silently on the coffee table. The bass guitar leaned against the wall—untouched for hours. The ashtray was overflowing. The apartment smelled like smoke and stale air and isolation.

Hong had been alone for four days. Four days of ignoring calls. Four days of letting the group chat stay silent. Four days of convincing himself that this was better. That staying away was protecting everyone.

That if he just stayed in the dark long enough, eventually the feelings would go away.

They hadn't.

Down in the alleyway below.

Tui stood with his jacket collar turned up against the chill. His breath made small clouds in the cold air. He had watched chat remain entirely dead for days. He had watched Lego fall apart. He had watched Nut spiral into confusion. He had watched William carry his own secret pain. And his quiet, protective patience had officially run out.

He pulled out his phone and typed a message directly to Hong.

Tui: I'm downstairs. If you don't open the door right now, I'm going to yell your name out the window until the entire building wakes up.

He hit send.

Inside the apartment. The notification lit up the dark screen of Hong's phone. But Hong didn't hear it. The low, solitary hum of his bass amp running in the background, combined with the heavy fog of his own exhaustion, kept him entirely unanchored from the digital world.

Sighing heavily, Hong finally shifted his weight and stood up to stretch his aching muscles. He walked toward the window, intending to pull the curtain back just an

inch to check the weather.

When he looked down, his breath caught.

Standing right beneath the streetlamp was Tui. His arms were crossed over his chest. His eyes were locked onto Hong's third-floor window with a look of stubborn determination. As Hong watched, Tui raised his phone, pointed at it, then pointed directly at Hong.

The message was clear: I'm not bluffing.

Hong stood frozen for a few seconds. His silver rings clinked against the window frame as his hands shook slightly.

The absolute last thing he wanted was vulnerability. Questions. Anyone forcing him to remove the armor he had spent eight years building. But looking at the sheer, unyielding persistence on Tui's face, Hong knew he couldn't hide in the dark anymore.

With a defeated click of his tongue, Hong turned away from the glass. He walked over to his front door and unlocked it. He left it slightly ajar—a silent invitation—and returned to his spot on the floor.

Letting Tui up into his isolated sanctuary.

Minutes later.

The heavy metal door swung open. The bitter, familiar haze of trapped cigarette smoke spilled out into the dim concrete stairwell.

Hong sat on the floor, his faded black shirt hanging loosely off his shoulders. His chemical-silver hair fell in uncombed clumps across his forehead. He looked entirely hollowed out—but his eyes were guarded, his posture stiffly maintaining the armor he had spent eight years building.

Tui didn't wait for an invitation. He stepped firmly into the space, his broad shoulders tight with an uncharacteristic, simmering tension. For days, he had been patient. For days, he had waited for Hong to come to him. For days, he had trusted that Hong would reach out when he was ready.

But watching Lego collapse. Watching Nut spiral. Watching the entire group fracture—it had cracked Tui's steady patience.

Hong leaned his shoulder against the doorframe. A cold, sarcastic mask slid over his face as he reached into his pocket for a fresh pack of cigarettes.

"You made your point downstairs, Tui," Hong said, his voice hoarse. "If you came here to lecture me about my attendance, you can save your breath. I'm working on

a track. I'm busy."

The blatant, transparent lie hung in the smoke-filled air. Hong's walls were built so high. His refusal to be vulnerable was so absolute. The dismissiveness in his tone—like Tui's presence was an inconvenience rather than an act of care—broke something in Tui's calm demeanor.

He stepped closer, forcing Hong to meet his eyes.

"I don't know what happened," Tui said, his voice low, tense, heavy with frustration. "But I know you're hurting. And I know you're shutting us out. And I don't know how to help you if you won't let me."

Hong blinked. His fingers paused on his lighter. But he didn't look away, his jaw clenching defensively.

Tui gestured sharply toward the dark apartment behind them.

"It's been four days since you stopped going to university," Tui continued. "Lego is wandering around like a ghost because one of his best friends is ignoring him. All you do is work and smoke. Do you think you're the only one carrying any weight? Lego is physically deteriorating trying to protect everyone. And you're just sitting here pretending you exist in a void."

The mention of Lego's name caused a visible micro-fracture in Hong's clinical mask. His silver rings clinked sharply against the lighter as his hands gave a sudden, involuntary shake. He wanted to snap back. To push Tui down the stairs and lock the door completely. To maintain the isolation that felt safer than connection.

But the raw fury and genuine pain in Tui's voice pinned him to the spot.

Hong looked down at the cigarette pack in his hand. His thumb traced the rough, crumpled edge of the cardboard.

The anger that had flared in Tui's eyes just a second ago softened into something much heavier—a profound, lingering exhaustion that felt painfully familiar to everyone in their circle lately.

The silence stretched between them, thick and suffocating. Finally, Tui let out a long, defeated breath.

"We're your friends, Hong," Tui said quietly. "Just talk to us when you feel more comfortable. Don't shut yourself away. You don't have to tell us everything. You don't have to be vulnerable all at once. But you have to let us know you're alive. You have to let us know you still care. Because right now—right now it feels like you've given up on all of us."

The words hit Hong like a physical blow. They cut straight through the eight years of

armor he had meticulously built to survive.

For a split second, he wasn't twenty-two anymore. He was fifteen. Standing in a cold room with his hair shorn away, listening to his mother tell him that being himself was a source of unendurable shame. He had spent so long equating vulnerability with punishment that he truly didn't know how to look at Tui and see safety.

He gripped the doorframe tightly. His silver rings bit into his palm as he forced a harsh, defensive breath through his teeth.

"You don't have to do it all at once," Tui said gently. "We'll be waiting when you're ready."

Turning on his heel, Tui walked down the concrete steps. His heavy footsteps echoed into the quiet night.

Hong remained frozen in the doorway.

The bitter smoke trailed out behind him into the empty hallway as he stared at the dark screen of his phone. Completely trapped between the safety of his isolation and the devastating cost of his silence.